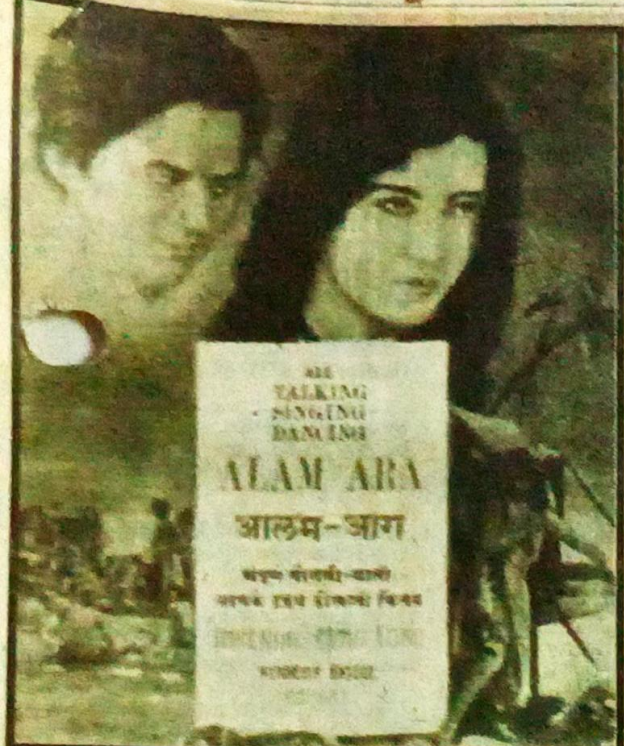




India offers mute testimony to silent era

discovered that till as recently as the late 1960s, the big picture simply didn't exist!

Former NEAI director P K Nair took *Newsline* on a vintage journey that stretched from Bombay to Dubai, dug deep into the dead of night for a wooden box of priceless nitrate negatives and even to a book depot, whose most valuable possession was in fact 11 reels of a classic silent film.

Beginning with the hunt for Phalke, the father of Indian cinema, Nair says: "Dadasaheb Phalke's family was very cooperative. We met his eldest son Nilkanth, who lived in Dombivli, his other son Prabhakar in Nashik and daughter Mandakini, who starred in Phalke's *Kalya Mandan*. In 1968, we found the opening reel of *Raja Harishchandra*. Three years later, Nilkanth gave

are, quite literally, bits and pieces of 14 films. Only six of them are complete! For a

country whose imagination is fired by its celluloid imagery, can there be a bigger irony?

Half a century since the first frame shot on Indian soil was canned, the Pune-based National Film Archives of India (NEAI) set out on a determined journey

to piece together the story of Indian cinema, especially the silent era which opened when the curtains went up on Dadasaheb Phalke's *Raja Harishchandra* in 1913. Much to its dismay, it



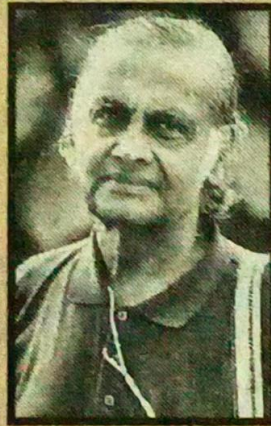
A still from *Raja Harishchandra*

us the closing reel. Then he parted with another one, which was from *Bhakt Pralhad*. Among the other treasures, stored in an old wooden box,

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M S M DESAI
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BEFORE the latest Bollywood blockbuster goes titillating your senses, freeze frame! Now ponder this: the Indian film industry, the world's largest dream factory, has preserved for posterity only the opening and closing sequences of the first Indian feature film ever made — Dadasaheb Phalke's *Raja Harishchandra* (1913). Add to that another shame: there is no trace, not even an inch of footage, of the first Indian talkie — Ardeshir Irani's *Alam Ara*. And of the glorious silent era that totted up 1,120 films between 1913 and 1933, all that remains



P K Nair

be genuine, they gave me all the... he said reaching for his pocket to... but all of Rs 220. A full Rs 1,780 short!

Obviously, by some sleight of hand, the... but had pulled out Rs 1,380 from the original wad of notes he had given us and used the excuse of the "policeman" to quickly clear out. Even the fact that we knew the script before hand did not help at all because Tariq himself fell for it. Such was their mastery.

We laughed about our loss because it wasn't too big and anyway we were only testing out a story. (Also, the pounds were borrowed from the NRI brother of a staffer. But the fact that this happens to hundreds of foreign tourists every day right under the nose of the zonal DCP is, of course, the tragic part of the story.

Old masters fall silent forever...

was fleeting footage of *Sant Namdev*, five-minute footage of *Lanka Dahan* and six reels

(90 per cent) of *Kaliya Mardan*."

But the discovery was not without dark drama. Nair remembers waiting for a wooden box, which was to arrive at Pune from Nashik by taxi, in the wee hours. "Why at night? Because we were afraid that the old nitrate negatives may explode during the journey." He recalls the gasps of disbelief as the treasure chest yielded its contents: *Amba* and Shyam Sunder Agrawal's *Diler Jigar*, both complete.

"Three silent films were acquired from the British National Archives — *Light of Asia*, *Siraj and Throw of Dice*. After that, we found *Karma*, the first talkie made by Himansu Rai and *Jamai Babu*, the first silent Bengali film made by Kalipada Sen (1930). Another silent gem was *Pitru Prem*," he says.

But tracking down Markhand Varma was itself an adventure worth recording in the annals. Had it not been for a careless filmmaker, the reels would still be resting on a forgotten shelf in a Madras-based book depot. The publishers, Kamalalaya, confiscated the reels from B N Rao after a court battle as

the film-maker had not sought their permission. The NFAI had struck gold: 12 reels, all but one, of the 1931 silent film.

"We also got one silent film from Bangkok, a two-reeler film, *Sukanya Savitri* (1926), courtesy the Royal Film Archives of Thailand," says Nair, ruing the NFAI's helplessness in retrieving Indian films made by foreigners and Indians and which have long since left the country's shores.

"Countries like South Africa, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and Singapore are in possession of some valuable prints as many Indians have settled there," he explains. "The Middle East, Pakistan and Bangladesh are virtual treasure troves as many Muslim filmmakers have migrated to these countries." The Sangdil negatives, for instance, were unearthed from a sweet-meat shop owner in Dubai, he reminisces.

If the legacy of the silent film era speaks volumes for neglect, the archives of the early days of the talkies are only a shade better. Barely 25 per cent of the films made between 1934 and 1945 are available. Sample this:

Ranjit Movietone made 150 films but only a couple remain. Studios like Sharda Film Company, Madan Theatre of Calcutta, Vishnu Movietone, Kohinoor and Young India Pictures, all of which made hundreds of films, lost most of their work to fires in the 1930s and 1940s.

Also, Nair explains, old cine laboratories like the Bombay Film Laboratory, Ramnord and Film Centre, which possess a fair number of old negatives, say they neither have the facilities to preserve and store them nor can they afford to acquire the technology.

Adds incumbent NFAI director, L. K. Upadhyaya: "Producers still do not give us the authorisation to take prints of their films, even at our cost. Worse, producers today too do not know how to preserve their own prints. They store them either in their office cupboards or at home. After their films have done the rounds of the cinema halls and after recovering their profits, they forget about the negatives. In the silent era, several prints were either reduced to powder or made it to the *raddiwala*."